

Governor Thornburgh speech to the University of Pittsburgh Engineering Alumni, Pittsburgh: issues following the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, April 19, 1979 (15:25)

>>Thornburgh: I don't know whether that was a standing ovation or a 7th-inning stretch, but...

[Laughter]

...I'll assume it was the latter. My good friend of long-standing, Jim Levine, I thank you for a gracious introduction. Bill Milaksis, I thank you for inviting me. Max Williams, I take my hat off to you as an outstanding dean of this great school of engineering. And to the great chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh, Wes Posvar, a good and trusted friend, I say thanks for having me here this evening. I've been in Pittsburgh all day today, kind of making up for a commitment that I was unable to keep about two weeks ago. I've lived in this city all my life, and I suffered through many long years of the ignominy of the Pittsburgh Pirates. And the day after I was elected governor of this commonwealth, I received a call from my friend Joe O'Toole at the ball club, and he said, "How would you like to throw out the first ball at the opening day for the Pirates in 1979?" And, believe me, I don't know which was a greater thrill, having won the office of governor of this commonwealth or realizing that lifelong desire to be there throwing the first ball out. Well, we had a few events over in central Pennsylvania that kept me from that.

[Laughter]

And the five errors the Pirates made on opening day in that chilly atmosphere convinced me I probably would have dropped the first ball anyway. But I am very glad to be here this evening in Pittsburgh and to join with many of you who have contributed to a great school of engineering. I think I've got to be a little bit candid about my engineering background. Jim pointed out generously that I did indeed have a degree in civil engineering. And I've got to say that Harvey and Bill, if you weren't looking through your transit at pretty girls, you're no civil engineers in my book.

[Laughter]

But I am proud of the fact that my grandfather was for many years the chairman of the math department at Lehigh University. And all of my uncles and brother are engineers. My father was a

distinguished civil engineer. And I have found over the years that the training and discipline of the mind that's imparted to you by an engineering education can't be completely thwarted by taking your diploma in hand from an engineering school and going to law school. I think there is a continuum there that has been of great benefit to me. And to you students who aspire to greatness in the engineering profession, I leave you with only one reminder -- that if you fail as an engineer, you can always end up being a governor somewhere.

[Laughter]

My staff, in their enthusiasm, somehow didn't quite realize that there are limitations on my engineering credentials. When they were preparing me for this appearance this evening, they realized that President Carter is often referred to as a nuclear physicist rather than a nuclear engineer. And they suggested that I become billed in the future as a civil physicist...

[Laughter]

...rather than a governor. That prompted my first veto of this month. But seriously it's very difficult, even in lighter moments, to avoid the subject of nuclear power in Pennsylvania today, and I certainly don't intend to do so this evening. Having lived through what many regard as the most difficult days of decision a governor has faced in this century, I'm not about to forget that there's something on that Three Mile Island in central Pennsylvania that is powerful and strange and not entirely, even today, under control. I'm not about to forget that some very brave and tired women and children fled from their homes and lived on a stadium floor for a 10-day period because something that can't happen here almost did. I'm not about to forget that our people and our lovely countryside have been put through the kinds of emotional, physical, environmental, and economic strains that may never be fully comprehended by anybody. I'm sure you join me in praying that the events on Three Mile Island are never repeated -- not anywhere at any time in this fragile world of ours. But while prayer for the world can do a lot, there is more -- much more -- that each of us can do for Pennsylvania in the days ahead. The immediate crisis seems to have passed us by. That crippled reactor continues to be reduced to a status I never knew existed until the morning of March 28. I refer, of course, to a cold shutdown, one of the more positive nuclear terms that the world has added to its vocabulary in recent weeks. While the shutdown will be a welcome event, it only signals the end of phase one of the crisis we face in our commonwealth. During that period of time that occurred last

month, our people resisted panic. They turned a brave face into the storm while the whole world was watching. During that period our businesses resisted ruin under pressure. Some of them fed and housed the homeless or in other ways made themselves part of a team effort to keep our social fabric from ripping apart. And during that period our government, from the courthouse to the statehouse to the White House, worked together to preserve order and to plan for the worst. These same governments now are planning to continue their cooperation in a phase two, a long and painstaking struggle for moving forward again. I have asked the White House, and it has agreed, to dispatch a team of federal officials to work under direction of members of my cabinet in assessing the impact that this accident is having on Pennsylvania. I've asked the White House, and it has agreed, to provide all appropriate assistance to our people in recovering from any health, environmental, or economic damage they may have suffered or might suffer because of this power-plant accident. My request Wednesday for the Small Business Administration to declare central Pennsylvania an economic disaster area, making it eligible for low-interest loans, is the first of many calls for aid that will emerge from understanding now in effect between Harrisburg and Washington. I've asked the federal government, and it has agreed, to inspect every nuclear reactor located within the borders of Pennsylvania and to assure me if it can that the accident on Three Mile Island shall not be repeated. I am also recommending a review of federal regulatory standards, with an eye toward the licensing of utility company executives and operators to guarantee the presence of round-the-clock expertise at every nuclear facility in America. I have expressed recently some serious doubts about the future of nuclear power in Pennsylvania and about the widely held assumption that we can't meet our energy needs in a wide variety of ways. Especially am I concerned with the failure to convert our vast Pennsylvania coal resources into a source of energy for the whole nation. Just beneath our state's surface lies potential energy for the next 100 years, and yet we have not understood or devoted the resources and development effort necessary to realize that treasure in our midst. The safety of existing nuclear facilities and the search for additional alternate energy sources are probably the two most important challenges confronting us in the wake of Three Mile Island. They also happen to be the kinds of challenges which institutions such as the school of engineering at the University of Pittsburgh and the vast array of technology in the business world represented here this evening are best prepared to help us meet. And meet these challenges we must. Both university, business, and the commonwealth are now in the grips of an unavoidable effort to stretch limited financial resources to meet essential needs. I have spoken frankly and directly with your

chancellor and members of your board of trustees about the stark realities of this year's fiscal needs of the commonwealth and the prospects for solving those needs in this post-Proposition 13 era. For both university and commonwealth, restraint and responsibility must be the watchwords, lest unwanted retrenchment becomes a necessity. If our need for fiscal restraint and a painstaking approach to the commonwealth's budget was great when I presented that budget to the General Assembly last month, it has become urgent in this month. Much as we'd like to forget, potholes are still with us on our highways and bridges, providing not only discomfort to all of us who must dodge them, but severe retardance to our effort to develop Pennsylvania economically. Much as we'd like to forget, many Pennsylvanians are still out of work, and seed money for industrial development, most notably through the Pennsylvania Industrial Development Authority, must be forthcoming from the commonwealth if we are to be in a position to retain those who are important employers today and to attract the employers of tomorrow. Much as we'd like to forget, our educational network, our institutions of basic and higher education, need the support which can enable them to fully develop our most precious natural resource, our young people, so that no quest for maximum realization of educational potential is cut short due to lack of funds. And much as we'd like to forget, our need for modest increases in revenues to meet these goals is no longer just apparent. In an era of double-digit inflation and rising employment costs, it is compelling in the society that must grapple with the aftermath of Three Mile Island. There are those with whom this message has not yet fully to register. And I appeal to you, as enlightened leaders of our educational and business community, to help me pass it along. The budget I presented last month to the General Assembly is austere. It calls for an increase in state general fund spending of only 5.8% -- nearly one half the current rate of inflation, nearly one half the rate of increase in employment costs negotiated by the previous administration, and nearly one half the 10.6% average annual increase in spending indulged in by that administration during its eight years in office. But even within current limits, we as a commonwealth, just as you as a university, must have some discretion and some incentive to shift and adjust our priorities and meet the changing problems of our generation. I suggest to you that that shifting and adjusting is very much in order, in view of the lessons pouring out of Three Mile Island. I suggest to you that there may be no higher priority for our society today than the development of safe, reliable, and lasting energy resources for our people. These may include nuclear sources. They may not. I suggest to you that the engineering profession and its institutions of higher learning face no greater test as contributing members of this

commonwealth than to tackle this dilemma now shared by us all. I know that this profession and this institution stand ready to meet that test with the same grit and determination that the world saw on the face of central Pennsylvania two weeks ago. I know you will do your part to add to the vast storehouse of information and technology we must have in order to reach the critical decisions of tomorrow. This is what I meant when I said from Harrisburg that the time has come for all Pennsylvanians to come together -- westerner and easterner and everything beyond and between -- to see that our children and their children never live through the tension and strain from which a half-million Pennsylvanians are still recovering. If we do that -- and we will -- we not only will endure. We will thrive. We will prosper, and we will prevail. Thank you and Godspeed in your activities to this great university and its school of engineering.

[Applause]